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# The Arbiter

sci-fi

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**Chapter 1 by Michael Anderson**

"You're not human anymore."

The Arbiter paused. The flat, oblong stone he had intended to skip expertly against the placid lake's surface instead remained in his hand, its perfect flight interrupted by Maria's sudden accusation. The crisply dressed man turned to regard her silently, and Maria had to fight not to shiver under his intense gaze. The perfectly tailored suit and matching fedora the man wore exuded class, and he wore them with the familiarity of a man born to power; like a surgical wound, a crimson tie cut through the black field of the Arbiter's silken shirt, and a small feather of matching color flew like a flag from his hat. The look was entirely out of place in the serene wilderness landscape, but the Arbiter seemed as comfortable as any hiking adventurer might be in the shadow of the mountain, at the shore of the alpine lake Maria recalled with such longing.

"You're not human," Maria repeated, "and this isn't real." She wondered if she sounded as weak and afraid as she felt when she said it, but she refused to look away from the apparition before her, refused to give him the satisfaction.

The Arbiter studied her quietly for another few moments that stretched painfully for Maria, then he shrugged and turned back to the lake. "I'm more human than you are now, miss. I wish it weren't so, and I'm sorry that it is, but them's the breaks." He flicked his elbow and wrist, and the dark stone he had held kissed the lake's surface a dozen times before plunging to the frigid depths. Circular ripples collided and melded, mesmerizing in their gentle unpredictability. "And I warned you when we met that the Construct would build a scene from your memories so real

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I would use it." He shrugged again and passed the stone to Maria with an easy underhand toss. She caught the rock before she could think to reject his gesture.

"You could have been decent and just let me die," Maria responded casually, flicking the stone out over the lake wistfully. It had been decades since her father had last taken her to this small lake in the mountains, and she had found herself missing the peace of the wild every day since then.

"Nice." The Arbiter nodded appreciatively toward the lake, his eyes focused on the point in the distance where the water had finally swallowed her rock. He bent and picked up another stone. The Arbiter weighed the rock, then tossed it aside with a small grunt before picking up another stone more suitable for skipping. "Most people wish they had been allowed to die at first, miss, but I think you'll find that changes quickly. After you've acclimated to the Construct, you'll be given access to the public domain, where you'll be able to interact with others like yourself." He threw the rock he'd selected and shook his head in disappointment when it sank after only half a dozen skips. "Who knows," the Arbiter asked, turning toward Maria again, "someone you used to know may be in here with you. Maybe even family. It's not a bad way to exist, you know. Immortality, society, and a reasonably pliant reality that molds itself to its users."

"All for the low, low cost of my body and soul," Maria countered sarcastically. The Arbiter grinned, flashing perfectly straight rows of flawlessly white teeth. Maria couldn't decide if his smile made him more attractive, or if it made him look more like a shark. Perhaps a bit of both.

"I dig your sense of humor, miss, but I don't think you're the type to put much stock in the idea of souls and the afterlife."

"No? Seems to me that "the afterlife" is precisely where I find myself now."

"Touché," the Arbiter conceded with a quick tip of his hat.

"And now I'm being asked to make a deal with the Devil," Maria continued, looking at the Arbiter

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had to stifle a giggle, despite her fear and anxiety. "Did I say something funny?" asked the Arbiter.

"This whole charade is funny," Maria responded, using her arms to indicate the virtual reality around them. "I'm a dead, low-level member of the human resistance, trapped in a computer simulation with the most reviled traitor in humankind's history, a traitor who is trying to squeeze me for information I don't have and wouldn't give up if I did." She took a deep breath to steady herself. There it was: she was dead. Did saying it aloud count as acceptance?

The smile faded from the Arbiter's face, replaced with something that looked alarmingly like pity. "I'm not squeezing you for anything, miss. This is not an interrogation. That happened already, in the second or two it took to transfer your consciousness from your ruined body to this medium. I know everything you know, and you'll be glad to hear that it doesn't help me in the slightest. Your compatriots will continue to fight, and more innocent people—including many innocent, collaborative humans your cause considers traitors—will die before I stamp out the last of this insurgency." The sudden knowledge that she had been stripped bare before the creature in front of her hit Maria like a physical blow, and she lowered herself to sit on the rocky beach before she fainted.

The Arbiter looked away from her, toward the snowcapped mountain at the far shore of the lake, and then he shook his head sadly. "I just wanted to help," he said so quietly that Maria wasn't sure that he was still talking to her. He turned toward Maria and took several steps forward. Maria cringed and scuttled a short distance away, but rather than an attack, the Arbiter's open hand stretched out toward her. "C'mon," he said, gesturing for her to take his hand. "Your memories aren't going to help you now. Maybe mine will." Maria hesitated, still expecting a trick or some lightning bolt to strike and erase her at last from the universe. "I won't bite," she heard the Arbiter say above her. "And there's always the possibility you may see or hear something from my past that might help you kill me." Maria looked up slowly, until her gaze met the Arbiter's bright green eyes. Fabricated or not, she caught a glimpse of an ocean of sorrow and loneliness in those eyes that were not really eyes. She closed her eyes and

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Chapter 2 by Rainyday

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believe I actually caught a glimpse of the 1's and 0's that must have been the coding for the next scene that would envelope me. I marveled for a moment that I now consisted of those same 2 numbers, the Arbiter said himself that my body was in ruins. This ever changing sort of cyber-wonderland was for now my home, or prison here in this Matrix. But I had to keep my head straight whether it was made of ones and zeros or grey matter. This Arbiter was a clever program and nothing more. Or was he? Surely before I open my eyes and absorb the world constructed around me only milliseconds before I must remember that it will be a scripted lie to make me question everything I fought for. But why would the Arbiter care to lie a simple human who's body lay in ruins after trying to defeat him. I am no longer able to pose a threat to him. What does he wish to gain from this? Oh well there is no better way to answer my questions than opening my eyes...

### Chapter 3 by Rainyday



Before my eyelids flicked open I could already smell a very familiar odor, an aroma that I found comforting and have known in my youth well. It was the scent of a School Cafeteria at lunch time and it brought the first twinge of nostalgia to my core like a soft kick to the sternum. My youth, no my very life in which this world existed was no more. I would never step into a cafeteria fresh with the hope and curiosity of what the future may bring. My mother is probably crying hopelessly realizing that same thing right now.

"Maria" the Arbiters voice caught me off guard.

"What?" I said perturbed, putting my best tough girl face trying hard not to let this image of my grieving mother make tears that my enemy will see fall down my face..

"Don't grieve Maria, not now until you have seen what I have to show you. Your thoughts of your former physical life can not help you now. Emotions can only confuse things here in this limbo state." He looked me in the eyes reassuringly. He Looked much less sharkish now. In fact he looked quite attractive. An unintended gasp slipped from my lips. The sudden idea that he may have read my thoughts and adjusted the physical features of the arbiter to appear more to my liking kicked my anxiety up a notch or 2. Nausea and a dash of vertigo rose in me until I had to sit to stop myself from falling down like a drunken fool.

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I looked up at his green eyes. Almost feeling a delirious sort of apathy, conceding that resistance at this point is futile. A sort of drunken courage replaced the nerves and fear, as if I had washed downed a couple of shots of patron down before I stood up. "You have my attention. What ya got?" I said dropping my hand in an gesture of exasperation.

"Samuel!" A woman called out to a young man alone at a table with a backpack slung over his shoulder as if to leave at any moment. He held a hoagi in one hand and a heavy looking text book in the other. He turned toward the voice. The woman must have been standing inches behind where I stood and i thought for a brief moment he was looking at me, but tha one can only be a spectator in memories. He had a not so trendy set of thick lens glasses on but there was no mistaking the green eyes behind them.

"So" I said to the Arbiter "Do I call you Sammy, Sam or do you still prefer Samuel?" Feeling rather proud of my quick observation and (considering everything) my ability to have a witty comment for the Arbiter. I turned smugly to see sorrow undoubtedly there in my captors face briefly before he tried to replace it with a grin that says "I am fine and not at all breaking my own code of behavior here in limbo"

"No." he said. "I am not Sam." A loud shot rang out just then followed by horrific screaming, and the sound of trampling feet. The Arbiter only winced slightly when the shot sounded and said with a very serious face that held back all that what once must have broke him "Sam was my son".... The horrified screaming had now evolved into hysterical crying the same womans voice now far in front of me screeched out in desperation "Someone please call 911 please hurry"...

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